TFR: What's a TFR?

by H. Dean Chamberlain

"...flight restriction near Brookings OR. Effective immediately until further notice. Pursuant to 14 CFR Section 91.137A(2) temporary flight restriction are in effect within a 5 nautical mile radius of (42(06.3(N/124(07.4(W) and the Crescent City/CEC/ VORTAC 356 degree radial at 20 nautical miles at and below 6,000 feet MSL to provide a safe environment for fire fighting aircraft operations...."

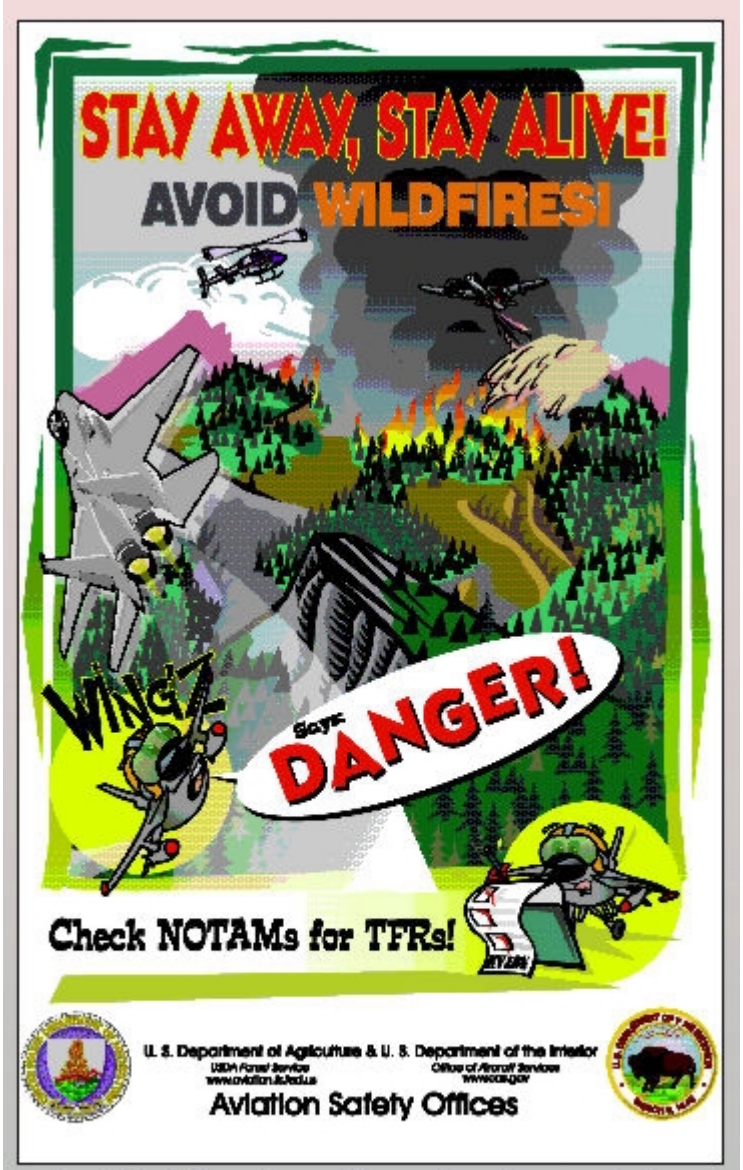
This is an example of one type of temporary flight restriction (TFR). But why are we discussing TFR's?

While at the Experimental Aircraft Association's AirVenture '99 in Oshkosh Wisconsin this past summer, this writer met Julie J. Stewart, the National Airspace Coordinator for the U.S. Forest Service. What had caught my attention were the colorful aviation posters on display at the Forest Service's exhibit.

The posters were designed to alert pilots to one of the MAJOR problem areas her agency has with pilots (civilian, general aviation, and military) each year flying into designated temporary flight restriction areas set up over forest fire sites. As a result, the U.S. Forest Service is part of an interagency group that has been working closely with the Pentagon on educating military pilots about the need to stay out of TFR areas. In fact, one of the special TFR posters on display was developed for the military to remind pilots to avoid wildfire areas. FAA Aviation News wants to remind all pilots, civilian and military, of the need to avoid flying into a TFR without appropriate authorization.

As noted in the accompanying side bar, a TFR may be imposed for many situations. But a few of the more common reasons a TFR may be invoked are for such natural disasters as forest fires, floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and to protect rescue efforts over such areas. We want to remind all pilots of the need to protect themselves and their aircraft from a possible mid-air collision by not flying into or through a TFR when one is in effect such as for a natural disaster. If there is such a disaster, you can bet there will probably be a TFR issued.

A TFR may also be established for other events such as a major accident site, space agency operations, or to protect the President, Vice President, or other public figure. According to Stewart there is a natural tendency for pilots to fly over a forest fire to see what is going on. The problem is there may be fire fighting aircraft and helicopters working the fire as well as other aircraft supporting the fire fighting efforts. Since these aircraft are working in a TFR area, they are focusing on their fire-fighting mission, and not your aircraft flying through the area. Add in authorized media aircraft and smoke and you can start to see the dangers involved in flying through the protected TFR area over a forest fire. The same is true over the damage areas of a hurricane or earthquake. Pilots not involved in the disaster relief operations, should always follow the procedures and guidance provided in the NOTAM establishing the TFR while one is in effect.



Stewart provided FAA Aviation News some important differences between the Aeronautical Information Manual's (AIM) generic definitions of a TFR and current U.S. Forest Service practices and procedures. According to her, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Department of the Interior no longer use the term "wildfire." She said, their preferred term is "wild land fire." In addition, she said the agencies prefer a TFR for a wild land fire be a suggested five nautical mile radius and 2,000 feet above the highest operating aircraft working on the fire or 2,000 feet above the highest elevation geographical point within the TFR. She pointed out that each fire is different and TFR's can and often do exceed the USFS suggested standard five mile radius. Factors that determine the size and shape of a fire TFR she said includes, "Size and shape of the fire,

rate of spread of the fire, entrance and egress points for operations aircraft, water sources, special use airspace and military training route locations, and the type and number of aircraft working the fire and their operational requirements."

In addition, Stewart said wild land fire NOTAM's will normally be described based upon a bearing and distance from a given VOR/DME or based upon latitude/longitude coordinates.

The danger of aircraft flying over and near disaster areas is real for another reason other than a possible mid-air collision. The FAA has published a document that outlines the dangers aircraft, particularly helicopters, can pose to damaged buildings and other damaged structures in disaster areas. For example, it is possible for a large helicopter's rotor wash to cause a severely damaged building to collapse further compounding the problems and risks to those on the ground.

So, avoiding TFR's is another good reason pilots should always review current NOTAM's for any airspace changes as part of their normal preflight activities. Not only will you help protect those on the ground and flying within a TFR, you will also keep the FAA happy by avoiding an enforcement action. As you can see, we all win when TFR's are complied with. Thanks for your support. Smokey the Bear will be happy you did.